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## Who Sits at the Table? A female farm activist's experience during the De Doorns farm workers strike, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT.** This journal article tells the story of a female farm activist and a leader in the De Doorns 2012/2013 farm workers' strike<sup>i</sup>. In this small agricultural town in the Western Cape, South Africa, workers downed tools, disrupting the harvest of export grapes and demanded a minimum wage of R150 per day.<sup>ii</sup> Ethnographic data – interviews, participant observation and archival documents – is used to document the female farm worker's journey into activism, her evolution and new consciousness of self through political work and participating in the strike. Rancière's (1999) theory of the presumption of equality is used to understand the gains made and losses incurred by the farm workers during and after the strike.

**Keywords:** Farm Workers, Farmwomen, South Africa, De Doorns, Activism, Popular Education and Presumption of Equality.



## **Quem se senta à mesa? A experiência de uma ativista agrícola feminina durante a greve de trabalhadores rurais *De Doorns*, na África do Sul**

**RESUMO.** Este artigo conta a história de uma ativista agrícola e uma líder da greve dos fazendeiros *De Doorns* no período de 2012 a 2013. Nessa pequena cidade agrícola no Cabo Ocidental, na África do Sul, trabalhadores abatiam ferramentas na colheita de uvas e impediam a sua exportação, junto com vinhos, e exigiam um salário mínimo de R150 por dia. Nesse estudo, dados etnográficos - entrevistas, observação participante e documentos de arquivo - são usados para documentar a jornada de uma trabalhadora feminina e ativista, a sua evolução e consciência de si através do trabalho político e como participante da greve. A teoria de Rancière (1999) sobre a “presunção de igualdade” é usada para entender os ganhos e perdas ocorridos dos trabalhadores agrícolas durante e após essa greve.

**Palavras-chave:** Trabalhadores Agrícolas, Agricultoras, África do Sul, *De Doorns*, Ativismo, Educação Popular e Presunção de Igualdade.

## **¿Quién se sienta en la mesa? La experiencia de una activista agrícola durante la huelga de trabajadores agrícolas de De Doorns, Sudáfrica.**

**RESUMEN.** Este artículo cuenta la historia de una activista agrícola y una líder de la huelga de los granjeros De Doorns en el período de 2012 a 2013. En esa pequeña ciudad agrícola en el Cabo Occidental, en Sudáfrica, trabajadores abatían herramientas en la cosecha de uvas e impedían su exportación, junto con vinos, y exigían un salario mínimo de R150 por día. En este estudio, datos etnográficos - entrevistas, observación participante y documentos de archivo - son usados para documentar la jornada de una trabajadora femenina y activista, su evolución y conciencia de sí a través del trabajo político y como participante de la huelga. La teoría de Rancière (1999) sobre la "presunción de igualdad" se utiliza para entender las ganancias y pérdidas ocurridas de los trabajadores agrícolas durante y después de esa huelga.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajadoras Agrícolas, Agricultoras, Sudáfrica, De Doorns, Activismo, Educación Popular y Presunción de Igualdad.

## Introduction

It is 4am in the summer of 2012. Activist 1 takes a deep breath, exhales, and as loudly as she can, blows her whistle. She is a woman in her early 50s who looks younger than her years, but all the same, the wrinkles on her face are deeply etched into her tanned skin. Forty years of hard labour on farms have burnt her skin a deep olive and although she has become physically strong, the years have also taken their toll on her body. One of her knees is damaged from farm work and she has had an operation on one hand – the result of years of washing laundry by hand. As always, she is colourfully and immaculately dressed, with her trademark head wrap creatively put together. Her brown skin, strong physique and head wrap give her a regal air.

We find her in De Doorns, a small agricultural town that is a pivotal node for export table grape and wine production in the Western Cape, South Africa. It is not uncommon for her to be awake at this time of the morning. To beat the blazing sun, farm work starts early. Ordinarily she would be readying herself for a day of labour – either in the vineyards or in a packing factory. This harvest season, however, everything is different as the farm workers of De Doorns have

collectively decided to embark on strike action. With the memory of the Marikana<sup>iii</sup> miners and their call for a living wage of R12 500 still fresh in their minds, farm workers argued that the minimum legislated wage of R69 per day was not enough to live on and raise a family. Instead they demanded a minimum daily wage of R150 (Andrews, 2014 and Kleinbooi, 2013).

What began as a simple wage dispute soon revealed deep tensions between the boers<sup>iv</sup> and farm workers on commercial farms in South Africa. As the vineyards of the Western Cape burnt, a deep-seated anger tied to the history of slavery, colonisation and apartheid surfaced (Andrews, 2014 and Kleinbooi, 2013).

In South Africa, farm workers have experienced: a reduction in employment opportunities, an increase in the casualisation of labour (Greenberg, 2010) and insecure land tenure and insecurity (Bernstein, 2013). Wegerif, Russell and Grundling (2005) found that between 1984 and 2004 almost 1.7 million people were evicted from farms. There is also substantial evidence that the South African government has failed to enforce, monitor and implement policies on farms and this has produced a culture of non-compliance with policy and/or regulations (Human

Rights Watch [HRW], 2011 and Greenberg, 2010).

On these farms, women experience these social injustices more acutely. They bear the brunt of the casualisation of labour (Greenberg, 2010), experience pay discrimination and often have no independent right to tenure or housing (Kehler, 2001 and HRW, 2011). This dependence makes women especially vulnerable to evictions, unfair labour practices and domestic violence (Shabodien, 2006 and HRW, 2011).

In De Doorns Activist 1, stands at the centre of the strike, at its place of origin, blowing her whistle to signal to her fellow workers that she is up and ready for another day of action. Little by little she begins to hear whistles reply. They start out slowly and gradually mount into a cacophony. From this response she knows that her *compañeros* stand in solidarity with her and that another day of rebellion in De Doorns has begun.

### **Her journey into activism**

Activist 1 is the fifth of 16 children. In Grade 5 her father was imprisoned, leaving her mother and her with the financial responsibility of sustaining the family. She left school to help her mother in the kitchen and began her career as a

farm worker working in the vineyards. At the age of 15 her mother “rented” her out as a domestic servant to the boer’s sister in a town near Cape Town. She was lonely, the work was hard, and she never saw her wages as they were paid directly to her mother.

At the age of 17, she packed up and returned to the farm. When she turned 20 she lost her first child who was only 11 months old. After this she again left the farm to work as a domestic worker in Cape Town. Her new employer moved to Namibia and she relocated with her. There she met and married her husband and started her family.

It was in Namibia that Activist 1 began to see herself as an activist. During that country’s first election in 1990 she assisted in recruitment and canvassing votes for Namibia’s liberation party, the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO).

Her involvement in Namibia prepared her for her political contribution in South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994. When she returned to South Africa, she joined the African National Congress (ANC) and began spreading the message about the vote on farms.

Fast forward to 2007, when she joins a grassroots organisation, which the study calls FFO<sup>v</sup>. This organisation uses Paulo

Freire's (2005) popular education theory to create multi-skilled, community-centred female farm activists who can confidently respond to injustices on farms. Through her extensive casework she has achieved important victories such as stopping evictions; addressing labour rights violations or simply helping women to end their abuse in violent marriages.

The work she does on farms is not without consequence as she is often singled out as a "trouble-maker":

*"They (the boers) do not like you to be clever and know your rights. When you open your mouth, they call you an instigator. So, I suffered hardships on the farms because I refused to keep quiet...But I don't care because I know my rights."*

Her continuous training and community casework on farms have prepared her for the most heightened expression of her activism – her participation in the De Doorns farm workers' strike of 2012/2013. As a leader inside of the strike, she provides the narrative from the grassroots.

### **The De Doorns Strike (2012/2013)**

When Activist 1 talks of the strike, her face lights up, she shifts her weight in her chair; straightens her spine and becomes noticeably excited. She owns the

strike. She calls it "our strike, us farm workers."

The idea of a strike came when farm workers working on a farm in De Doorns had independently negotiated an unprecedented wage rate of R150 per day. This new wage rate sent ripples throughout De Doorns:

*"When I heard that, we said 'Lord, for a long time we have struggled with the R69... Then we also wanted R150.'"*

Activist 1 and other workers then planned a farm workers' strike. At the centre of this organisation was a group of FFO women called "The De Doorns Big Five", of which Activist 1 was a member. In addition to the women, two men were also included in this group. Together they held meetings, discussed issues and sent out mass text messages:

*"There was no forum; there was nothing. We just decided we were going to rise up and make our demands."*

The workers had a list of 10 demands, which included an end to:

- Assaults of farm workers by boers;
- Farm evictions of farm dwellers (especially older farm dwellers);

- Rent payment by children over the age of 18, living with their families, but not working on the farms;

- Rent payments for farm homes and
- High electricity costs

The strike began with the arrest of teenagers who took part in a protest march at the end of October 2012. The teenagers were set to appear before the court and on the day of their appearance the workers downed tools and instead congregated in front of the court to demand their immediate release.

When the police arrived at the scene, they wanted to speak to the farm worker's leaders. The crowd said that they were all leaders, but the police randomly selected people who they recognised. This group became the farm worker's strike committee, of which Activist 1 was part. The police-elected males on the committee dominated the proceedings and she had to fight for her voice to be heard:

*"The men wanted to take over (dominate). FFO staff pushed us and told us, 'Don't you allow the men to take over the issue, because you started this.'"*

The divergent demands of the strike were being facilitated through a commission and there were different parties around the same table – organised labour, farmer associations, different arms

of government and the farm worker's strike committee. In these forums, Activist 1 again experienced attempts to stifle her voice. In one session, the farmer's association refused to accept the farm worker's demands, as they were handwritten. In another session she remembered a comment made by the farmer's associations:

*"We then sat and talked around the table. Then the boers said that they could not talk to such low-class people. Those were their exact words. They wanted to speak to provincial people. We, the workers, were too low-class to talk to them."*

The insistence of the farmer's associations to only consult with provincial and national structures had huge implications for the strike. As farm workers' structures were typically local in nature, the strike committee was by default excluded and organised labour, in the form of unions, then represented the interests of the farm workers. The venues also shifted from Cape Town to Johannesburg, some 1400 kilometers away, and the members of the strike committee could not afford the airfares to attend these meetings. She pinpointed this as the moment when the farm workers lost access to the negotiations. The final agreed wage rate of R105/day was not made in consultation with the workers and was accepted by

union representatives on their behalf. Because of their lack of resources and money, the farm workers, who began the strike, became passive observers to the final negotiations.

The irony was that she and many other farm workers made great sacrifices during the strike. They sacrificed their wages and went hungry during this period. Police used rubber bullets and live ammunition on protesters and three people were killed. Some strikers sustained permanent injuries. Women's homes were searched and ransacked and Activist 1 was on the run during the strike period. There were times when the leaders of the strike would go to bed having eaten nothing but ice lollies for the day.

Although a 52 per cent increase in their wages is a victory, Activist 1 remains disappointed in the final outcomes of the strike. In addition, farm workers face new challenges in the aftermath of the strike. The boers have responded by restructuring their cost structures. They now pay per hour and not per day, lunch breaks are deducted from their wages and deductions such as rent, water and electricity are made from salaries. There has also been a reduction in benefits such as: transport to and from farms or financial contributions for doctors' services. The use of private security and electric gates have also

reduced access to farms. Kleinbooi (2013, p. 4) views these as unilateral changes to the basic conditions of farm work employment that has left farm workers "no better off than before."

It is this disillusionment and suffering after the strike that makes the farm workers wary of being part of another strike. Her deep disappointment and anger are directed at government and unions alike:

*"I blame the government officials the most because they have the greatest power because most of government's people are farmers. That is why we did not achieve what we had set out to achieve..."*

*The government also works against us. Everybody is against those who suffer the most and who are the most vulnerable. Everybody is against us – they work hand in hand with the boers. The government is not on our side; that is what it is – they do not work in the interests of the poorest of the poor."*

## **The Contribution of the Case**

Activist 1 has always been political, but the strike tested her. After years of education at FFO she used all the skills and tools that she developed to participate in the strike. She organised workshops and meetings and together with other FFO activists, created an informal movement of workers that gave rise to the strike. She also used her creativity and incorporated



art into her struggle armour. She led the workers through dance, song and with her whistle. This experience gave her the courage to insist upon the right to be heard in the formal negotiation structures. Here the theory of Rancière (1999) is instrumental.

Rancière's (1999) argues that through the power of speech, all human beings possess similar abilities and intelligence; what he has calls "the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being" (Rancière, 1999, p. 30). This right to speak, however, is tightly enforced by what Rancière (1999, p. 28) calls the "police." These are all the institutions of society that regulate the order of domination. They control the location of different bodies, the meaning that can be given to speech and in so doing, regulate what different bodies can do, say and be.

For him "politics" occurs when there is a disruption to this police order of domination (Rancière, 1999, p. 32). Politics is any action that makes visible what is meant to be unseen or makes meaning and logic from a speech that is supposed to be considered noise or inconsequential. He argues that the presumption of equality to those who possess power is a radical act as it disrupts the natural order of domination.

Prominent in Activist 1's experience in the strike is the attempt to stifle her voice – the men in the strike committee, farmer's associations, government and organised unions. Using Rancière's (1999) framework these institutions can be seen therefore as the police because they regulate the narrative of the strike, who can participate and what demands are deemed consequential.

Despite the actions of the police, Activist 1 insists on her right to participate and for her voice to be heard. Her logic is simple – she is a farm worker, she has been involved in the strike since its inception, she is on the ground and is the closest to the farm workers' demands.

Activist 1's actions (and those of the De Doorns farm workers) are therefore examples of what Rancière (1999) refers to as politics. She uses her mouth to blow her whistle, her feet and hands to mobilise and organise the strike, her critical logic to insist upon being seriously considered in the strike committee and in the commissioned forum. Despite being called low class she knows she has a right to be there. Activist 1 therefore uses her entire body to perform politics.

In presuming their equality to those who possess power, the De Doorns farm workers rearranged the entire structure of the South African agricultural sector.

Farm workers disrupted table grape and wine production, which negatively affected the industry's local and international markets, and barricaded the national road. They brought the daily reality of the lives of farm workers – a marginalised and invisible sector of the South African society – to the full attention of South Africa and the world (Andrews, 2014 and Klienbooi, 2013).

The strike can be considered, therefore, a watershed moment across farms in the Western Cape of South Africa. What has emerged after the strike is a “new levels of consciousness” and “new confidence” (Andrews, 2014, p. 3). It represents a moment when ordinary people respond to conditions of inequality and can practically insert themselves into economic life (Hart and Sharp, 2014).

Despite this, however, the conditions of employment for farm workers after the strike can be considered the same, or in some instances, worse than before the strike. If the newly elected far-right Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, makes good on his electoral promises of a pro-market and favourable stance to agri-corporations (The Guardian, 2018), then South Africa and Brazil have at least one more thing in common. The gains made by indigenous tribes and *campesinos* within the Brazilian region, as well as

those made by the farm workers in South Africa, continue to hang in the balance. In both regions, the urgent work of social justice and equality is still necessary.

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<sup>i</sup> This article is located within a PhD study where the central phenomenon was to explore the education process that engendered activism amongst six female farm activists who live and/or work on commercial farms in South Africa. This journal article is one of the six cases.

<sup>ii</sup> At an exchange rate of 1 Brazilian Real equals 3,80 South African Rand; R150 equals 570 Brazilian Reals.

<sup>iii</sup> The workers of Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana in the North West Province of South Africa embarked on a strike demanding a R12 500 monthly salary (approximately R47 500 Brazilian Reals). On the 16 August 2012 the South African Police Service retaliated and killed 34 mineworkers, seriously injured 78 and arrested 250 miners. (Source: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/marikana-massacre-16-august-2012>).

<sup>iv</sup> The use of the term "boer" needs some explanation. Strictly speaking the English translation for the Afrikaans term "boer" is "farmer." Given South Africa's apartheid past, the word "boer," however, is associated with the racialised ideology and institutions that supported apartheid. These would include economic subordination, social segregation, political hegemony, legislation and violence (Wolpe and Unterhalter, 1991 and Hirson, 1979). The English term "farmer" does carry the same connotation and therefore the use of "boer" or "boers" will be used in the English text.

<sup>v</sup> This is a pseudonym and its use is a condition of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Department.

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